

his heart was a stone (but then his hands roam) by chasingwildlife

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Aged-Up Character(s), Alternate Universe - Modern Setting, F/M, this story is just YIKES

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Summary:

El was going to lose him. Mike was going to get married and things were never going to be the same. He would forget about her, too busy doting over his new wife. He would forget everything they were, everything they had. There were only two months left and then he would forget MikeandEl.

Also known as, Mike is engaged to another girl but he and El have some unfinished business.

(summary changed 5/25/2018)

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

title is from 'roses' by chainsmokers. the summary is shit because i just wrote this in the last four hours and idk whats going on. this is an idea thats been bouncing around in my head for days and i just needed to get it out of my system so i could focus on my actual chaptered fic. honestly, once thats finished im probably gonna turn this into a full-blown story too. anyway, this fic romanticizes an affair so read at your own discretion (apparently i cant write anything thats not controversial) and most of it is smut which i dont actually think im good at writing but i guess im just going for it. im supposed to be sleeping right now which is why this is a very hurried and messy note. thanks for reading and let me know what you think :)

The bartender probably hated Eleven by now. First, she spent several minutes unable to decide what she wanted to get. And now that she knew what she wanted to get, he has no idea what she's talking about.

"How have you never heard of an Appletini? It's just the two words put together, 'apple' and 'martini.' Sometimes people add caramel to it, which would be nice, but besides that it's simple," she insisted, refusing to leave until she got her drink.

"Okay, I know what it is, I just don't have all of the ingredients," the bartender argued back, raising his hands in surrender, his face twitching with frustration.

"Seriously? You don't have- "

Suddenly an arm lands across her shoulders, tugging her to the side and nearly choking her in the process.

"Alright, El, let's give the poor guy a rest." It was Max, waving

apologetically at the bartender who sighed in relief as she directed the bothersome girl far, far away from the counter.

They come to a halt near the table they had eaten dinner at earlier, its surface littered with various beer and wine bottles and emptied plates. Max pushed Eleven into her seat, designated by the fancy little name card written in curly, pretentious letters that she just couldn't stand, and plops down next to her. Eleven was drunker than she thought, the room spinning for just a moment until she closes his eyes and leans back into her seat.

"I think you just made that guy quit his job, El," Max commented lowly, irritation seeping into her words.

"He wouldn't make me a damn Appletini, Max," Eleven cried, her hands flying into the air dramatically. "What bartender can't make an Appletini?"

"Maybe a bartender with only a couple feet of space to store his ingredients?" Max offered, then slid a crystal glass of water in her direction. "Have some water."

Eleven obliged and sipped at the drink, finally quieting down.

"Can you just pretend you're having a good time? Please? This is your best friend's engagement party for Christ's sake," Max huffed exasperatedly, gulping down her own cocktail as if she needed it to continue dealing with her overly intoxicated friend.

"I am too having a good time!" Eleven protested childishly, sitting up in her seat and gesturing to their surroundings. "The food is great, the drinks are great, the people are great. Everything is *great!*"

"Okay, now is not the time for a mental breakdown," Max scolds, and then waves down the nearest waiter.

"No one is having a mental breakdown," Eleven argues as Max orders a double martini for them both.

"Right, well either way, you're giving me a headache," Max complains. "Don't talk to anyone until you're too drunk to walk, okay? Maybe then you'll enjoy yourself."

Eleven shuts up because Max isn't wrong – she does want to have fun. It was an amazing party; well-decorated, catered, loud music, and plenty of space to dance. It was impressive and Eleven wanted to take advantage of it, but it also infuriated her to no end.

She could see Dustin twirling a girl around the dancefloor under the flashing lights of purple and blue and green, visibly eager to be getting her attention. Will was at the dessert table, chatting up a super cute guy. *Go Will*, she thought. Her dad was laughing with Joyce, lingering close to the entrance so they could sneak out for a smoke together. Steve was lining shots up for him, Nancy, and Jonathan at the bar. Everyone was here, almost the entire town of Hawkins.

And Mike was with Ivy, of course, as they receive congratulations and show off Ivy's ring and tell the same *incredible* story of how he proposed over and over again. Because apparently, it's so interesting that Mike popped the question on Ivy's birthday in the backyard in a sea of thousands of little flickering fairy lights and rose petals dancing around each other on the surface of the pool. He even hired a violinist to serenade them. Eleven couldn't think of anything more cliché.

"Look, El, I know this is hard for you." Max's voice brought her focus back from the happy couple. It was soft and careful, like she was approaching the conversation as gently as possible. "But you need to get over it. It's time now."

Eleven scoffed.

"There's nothing to get over, Max. I'm fine. Why is that so hard to understand?" she groans, rubbing at her temples. They've had this discussion a million times. Their chat paused as the waiter approached with their cocktails which both girls promptly took a couple swigs of.

"Alright, keep telling yourself that," Max sighed resignedly, putting her drink back down on the table, then regarded her with a very serious look. "Just stop having sex with him."

Eleven startled and spluttered, whipping her head around to make

sure no one was nearby or listening, and Max tries not to laugh at the amount of alarm in Eleven's wide eyes.

"Not so loud! Are you insane?" Eleven whisper-yelled, reaching out and slapping Max on the arm.

"Ow!" she whined and slapped her back. "No one's going to hear. And even if they did, they wouldn't know we were talking about Mike."

"Now they would," Eleven moaned and rolls her eyes.

"Whatever, I meant what I said. It's only going to make things worse, Eleven. I'm just looking out for you."

"It's only sex, Max. It's not a big deal, okay?"

"It's sex with a man that's getting married in the next year. That's cheating, El! It's wrong. And it's not good for your heart either," Max maintained.

Eleven doesn't respond. She knew these things already, as much as she wouldn't like to admit it to Max. Besides, Mike told her anyway that they couldn't be doing that anymore, that all of that was over after the engagement party. It really had only been sex between friends, close friends who had known each other since they were awkward, pimply preteens. They were familiar with each other in ways that Eleven had never been with any of her boyfriends, so, if anything, Eleven wished that it was more of a normal thing to do considering how great platonic sex was. Although that didn't really explain why she felt like she had been broken up with somehow.

"Okay, fine, you can sit here and pout all you like. I'm going to go drink some expensive champagne, pig out at the dessert table, and then dance the night away with my boyfriend," Max announced and stood up.

"I'm not pouting," Eleven muttered, crossing her arms over her chest in defiance.

"Sure. Just do *not* have sex with him," Max asserted, sending her one final stern look before disappearing into the throng of people that

had gathered on the dancefloor.

“Who are you not having sex with?”

Eleven looked over to find Will lingering nearby, giving her a confused look.

“No one,” she sighed, leaning back in her chair. “Max is just being her normal, annoying self.”

“Right,” Will mumbled unconvinced, and takes the seat Max had just vacated. “Then why have you been pouting all day?”

“I haven’t been pouting, why does everyone keep saying that?” Eleven threw her hands up in frustration.

“Because you have been,” Will insisted, laughing a little. “Seriously, what’s going on?”

“I don’t know,” Eleven mumbled, looking at her friend shyly. “I just can’t believe Mike’s getting married. Like, what’s next? Children?”

“I mean, according to the K-I-S-S-I-N-G song, yes.” Will shrugged with a straight face that faltered when Eleven giggled at him.

“I’m being serious,” Eleven stifled her laughs and gave Will a firm look before a little bit of sadness swept over her and her eyes fell to the floor. “When did we all grow up?”

“It kind of feels like it happened all at once,” Will responded, and Eleven felt some relief that she wasn’t the only one overwhelmed by the prospect of adulthood. “I mean, Lucas and Max are next in line for marriage, I guess. And I’m sure Mike and Ivy will be interested in having a baby once they’re hitched.”

“You really think they will?” Eleven asked with large, glistening eyes and Will looked at her inquiringly due to the anxiety that shone through her question.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if they do, yeah.” Will nodded, his eyebrows falling together as he tried to figure out what was going on with his friend,

“And then it will just be you and me. Single pringles forever.”

“Dustin’s single too.”

“Not after the way he’s been dancing with that girl.”

“True. I… also may not be single pretty soon.”

“What?! Why? It’s that cute boy you were talking to, wasn’t it? Wait, do you know him? Are you dating him?”

“Calm down,” Will laughed and then produced a little slip of paper from his pocket with some messy numbers scribbled on it. “I just met him, he gave me his number is all. I might go out with him next weekend.”

“Oh my god, I’m going to be the only one left,” Eleven moaned dramatically. “Who will I get drunk with on Valentine’s Day in protest?”

“I think Steve would be down for that,” Will suggested and they glanced over to where the aforementioned man was skulking in the corner, glowering at all the couples dancing to the slow song that was playing.

“You’re probably right about that,” Eleven agreed and they chuckled.

“Okay, I have to go find Dustin, he owes me a drink,” Will announced and stood from his chair.

“You might want to check the nearest closet.” At his confused look, she continued, “he was getting pretty hot and heavy with that girl a few minutes ago.”

“Oh God, I refuse to walk in on Dustin having sex again.”

“Again?”

“Don’t ask.”

Eleven shrugged as Will walked away with no further explanation. The boys were like that, having grown up together they were sure to

have some weird experiences along the way. Her and Max were lucky to have joined the group later on in junior high, once at least some of the awkwardness of puberty had passed.

Eleven stood up not long after Will left, deciding she needed out of this room, needed air. She slipped past crowds of people and leaves the ballroom, finding herself in the grand foyer in the entrance of the house. Eleven always forgot just how rich Ivy's parents were until they threw big stunts such as these.

She stood in the open area, a shimmering chandelier hung down above her and an eloquent marble staircase led to the second floor. The front doors were tall and white with narrow windows flanking them, delicate patterns twisting down the glass. The floor was natural stone, white and sleek with an everlasting shine to it. She wasn't surprised that the air was tinted with the sweetness of essential oils. These people were too perfect to forget something like that. She tried to push down the simmering aggravation that rose up in her throat at the thought.

"Hey."

Whirling around, Eleven comes face to face with one of the two main attractions at this party. Mike was standing there in his classy, navy suit that Ivy had probably picked out for him. It seemed tailored to fit him just right, and she wants nothing more than to rip it off him.

"Hi," she replied, her voice just a little shaky. "What are you doing here?"

"I followed you out, obviously," Mike grinned, stepping closer to her.

"Shouldn't you be with her fiancée?" Eleven asked, harmlessly enough, but revelled at the possibility that Mike was choosing her over Ivy.

"She's with her girls – the DJ is playing a bunch of their favourite songs, apparently," Mike explained, and his eyes drift down, looking at the dress Eleven had worn to the event. It was short and ocean blue, with a lace up front and open back. Max had almost squealed when they found it because it clung to her frame beautifully.

Eleven hummed, unsure what else to say, her heart beginning to pick up in speed.

“This is an incredible dress,” Mike commented, his eyes still on her body, a hand reaching out to thumb over the fabric on one of her shoulders.

“Thanks, I like it too, it’s surprisingly comfy,” Eleven rambled, her cheeks growing warm.

“I mean that it looks incredible on you,” Mike clarified, his eyes moving suddenly to look into hers and she takes a sharp breath at how brightly they’re glowing with lust.

“Right,” she breathed, unable to break eye contact with him. “Thank you.”

“I want to – I wish I could-,” Mike stammered, moving even closer to her and resting a burning hand on her waist, the other hand reaching up to caress her cheek.

Eleven saw his eyes drift to her lips and him start leaning towards her so she quickly stepped back and barely caught his wrists with her fingers.

“This is your engagement party, Mike, your fiancée is in the other room,” she reminded him although she’s shocked that he seems to have almost forgotten this important bit of information.

“No one’s going to notice if I give you a little tour of the house,” Mike suggested, his tone innocent but the voluptuousness of his statement subtly lining his voice. “And we’ll be back before they know it.”

“I-,” she hesitated. But it doesn’t take much to win her over, not when Mike’s looking at her like that, when he looks irresistible in general.

“Okay.”

Mike was beaming and slipped his hands so that Eleven’s fell into them, intertwining their fingers together, and he tugs them excitedly

towards the stairs. Eleven was stumbling as they hurried up, up, up, and right before they disappeared into the dark hallway leading to the rest of the mansion, she chanced a look behind her. Looking up at her from the doorway between the ballroom and the foyer was Max, casting a very disapproving glance in her direction.

Eleven looks away.

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Mike's kisses were rushed and sloppy but they still left Eleven trembling as he kicked the door shut behind them. His hands were cupping at Eleven's cheeks, keeping her face in prime position as they stagger further into the dark room, and Eleven held onto Mike's arms like life support. He tasted like champagne and chocolate cupcakes and he smelled like fancy cologne but the sweat he must have built up from dancing was emerging from beneath.

Eleven's knees hit the bed and she gracelessly flopped back onto it, the two of them giggling at her klutziness before Mike joined her on the bed after discarding his jacket and throwing it over his shoulder.

When she noticed him fumbling with his zipper, she reached out and sweetly mumbled, "let me," before moving down the bed. Mike's pants were off before he could even process it, and Eleven could see his excitement from the stiffness of his cock.

As soon as his dick was out, Eleven has it in her mouth, and she hears Mike's quiet gasp above her. She shallowly bobbed up and down a couple of times before taking it down to the hilt, making her gag slightly which only caused Mike to moan. Eleven hummed around his dick, her tongue moving to swirl around its girth, before pulling off and gliding her tongue up the underside, looking up to see Mike's reaction the whole time. They made eye contact as Mike's mouth fell open and Eleven holds it as she takes him deep into her throat once more.

Her mouth left him, her lips moist and red and her pupils blown up and her cheeks flushed and Mike leant down to kiss her meaningfully, as if trying to communicate just how beautiful she looks to him at the moment. Eleven responded eagerly and bounces

up to get back on the bed, maneuvering them so that Mike hovers above the brunette, pressing wet kisses down the column of her neck and dusting his lips across her soft, warm skin. He wanted to suck marks all over her body, paint her reds and pinks to brightly contrast with her light skin. But they couldn't afford questions, so Mike held back and moved up to connect their ravaged lips again.

"I don't have anything with me," Eleven mumbled then, disappointment seeping from her voice. By 'anything,' she meant a condom.

"I do," Mike responded, and Eleven stilled. She imagined him saying the exact same thing at the altar a few months from now. But she didn't want to let him go, hand him over to someone else to love like this.

"What's wrong?" She looked up and Mike was looking down at her curiously, carefully. She doesn't explain her sudden quietness, and answers by cupping Mike's jawline and pulling him closer to kiss him slowly, sensually, trying to convey her feelings without truly having to face them.

Mike moved from the bed to grab a condom from one of the inner pockets of his jacket, returning to realize that Eleven still had a layer of fabric between them. He promptly lifted the dress over her head, pleasantly surprised to find she wasn't wearing a bra underneath and her nipples were pebbled and begging for the warmth of his mouth. He obliged, gently pushing Eleven back so she was prone on the bed.

Eleven whined against the sheets as Mike mouthed at her breasts, his hands coming up to massage them firmly, feeling the flesh give under his touch. He moved further down and quickly discarded the white panties clinging with wetness to her core, settling his head snugly between her thighs.

Eleven gasped out as his tongue swirled around her clit, then plunged deep within, but not quite deep enough. Then a finger was teasing at her folds, gently sliding far in as Eleven relaxed into the silky soft satin beneath her. And then another joined in, and one more, and Eleven falls apart under Mike's skillful hand, scissoring and curling to hit all the right places just as he'd done many times before. She

whimpered and moaned as Mike took her apart, piece by piece until she begged him for more.

Finally, *finally*, Mike's fingers left her to rip the condom open, and Eleven sits up to help him roll the rubber material on, smiling slyly up at him as she did so. Mike pressed at Eleven's shoulders and she takes the hint and lays back, allowing Mike to lift her legs up and rest them on his hips as he settles between them. He leant down and fit their mouths together, distracting her as he grips his dick and pushes firmly into Eleven, to which she lets out a shaky, shuddery moan. She always felt best when Mike's inside her, they seemed to mould intricately to each other, fitting in all the right spots and nooks and crannies.

"God, you're always feel so good," Mike hummed, his eyes shut tight as Eleven's heat surrounded him, smothered him in bliss. A moment later, Eleven is urgently pushing up against him.

"Please, move, *please*," the words flowed out of her mouth like a gurgling, bubbling river. And Mike drank them up.

With quick, determined movements, Mike pistoned his hips in and out at a strenuous pace, taking and taking and taking till Eleven had nothing left to give. Below him, he heard Eleven speaking gibberish, cursing and moaning, her hands clutched tight and digging into his back. He loved how vocal she was, loved knowing she was enjoying himself as much him.

When he opened his eyes again, he saw Eleven watching him, her eyes glossy and distant, her mouth wrenched open as various sounds leave her throat, her body rippling with pleasure. He caught the movement in the corner of his eye of Eleven reaching down towards her clit for extra stimulation, and stops her before she gets the chance, gripping her wrists and pinning them down next to Eleven's head.

"No, no, no," Mike told her, "want to see you cum on just my cock."

"Please, I can't, Mike, I need more," Eleven's lips parted to spew meaningless nonsense once more but Mike found it endearing.

So Mike lifted her thighs onto his shoulders, knowing the angle would get him deeper than before. He knew he was right when Eleven's voice gets a few octaves higher and her noises get more urgent. He watched her face twist and contort into various expressions filled with satisfaction.

"Oh, Mike, I think – I'm gonna," Eleven started to warn Mike as she feels the pressure building, the heat rising and rising.

Her jaw dropped open in a silent scream and Mike felt her pulsating against him, her muscles squeezing as if to pull him deeper in.

And that blissed out expression was what did it for Mike, what sends him over the edge. He grunted, falling against Eleven's slick chest and weakly thrusting a couple more times until he's reached his gratification. He laid there for a moment, tucking his face into Eleven's neck and feels her lungs fill and deflate beneath him, feels the rapid beating of her heart, feels the warmth that fills him from being close to his best friend.

"I think that's my favourite part," Mike commented a moment later as they're cleaning themselves up and redressing.

"What is?" Eleven asked, struggling just slightly to wrangle the dress up her torso.

"Getting to see you like that, I guess," Mike replied, and their eyes meet in the dark. Eleven's throat went dry as it clogged with emotion, and she remembers just where she is.

Because Mike did get to see Eleven experience one of the greatest pleasures in life, and she got to see him do the same. But so did Ivy. Eleven and Ivy were sharing the same body, the same person. Except it's not really sharing. Because Ivy was the one Mike goes home to, cooks for, shares a bed with, is marrying in due time. And Eleven got to be his best friend, sure, but there were some times, like now, when she wishes that there was more to their relationship than friendship and passionate sex. There were some times that she wants cuddling and holding hands and soft kisses and dates and waking up in the morning beside someone she loves.

Not that she loved Mike. She just considered him in a more-than-friendly way every once in a while. Liked to imagine things, think about how her life would be different if maybe they were in different circumstances. But this was all she had for now, and Eleven really does try to take what she can get and not ask for more.

Mike doesn't notice how deeply Eleven was thinking, only walks over to place a brief peck on her waiting lips, and tells her to wait a minute before coming down after he leaves. How romantic.

This time, when Eleven descended the stairs and saw Max looking up at her, arms crossed and eyebrows furrowed and eyes disappointed, it was not so easy to look away.

2. i think that i'll keep loving you, way past sixty five

Notes for the Chapter:

title is from 'best friend' by sofi tukker (i fucking love this song).

SURPRISE. im updating this way sooner than i thought i would but im like way too inspired to ignore this story right now lol.

ive decided, for now at least, that this story will start chapters with a little flashback and then go back to the present. i really want to build mike and eleven's backstory here so we can understand where their actions are coming from.

side note, i imagine ivy's character as looking like mackenzie porter. so look her up if you want a clearer vision of how im picturing her.

anyway, sorry this is a little shorter than the amount of words i would usually aim for a chapter. im gonna leave my even longer note for the end so i'll meet you down there. thanks for reading :)

six years earlier

It was a beautiful day. Eleven took a deep breath in, the scent of wildflowers cascading over her, and then let it out. The sun was glaring relentlessly down without any clouds to dilute its light. The sky was blue, wonderfully blue. It was such a pure colour that day that Eleven almost found it otherworldly. Pollen was floating through the air, carried by the softest torrent of a breeze. The grass was green, ripened by chlorophyll and staining her elbows and knees while she lay on her stomach. The trees were forming a wall around the pasture, shielding it from the world.

“What are you doing?”

She looked over to where Mike was laying down beside her, his arms folded behind his head, his face to the sky. The shine of the sun accented his sharp jawline and cheekbones, the spots where only just recently baby fat had plumped up his cheeks. Eleven hadn't noticed the filling out of his face as it happened, but the results were quite attractive. The other girls in school had definitely started showing more interest than before, now that he wasn't 'Frogface' anymore. She took pride in the fact that she wasn't as shallow as them, that she had started hanging out with Mike before puberty took its course and people like Jennifer Hayes began smiling at him in the hallways and slipping notes in his locker and whispering to him in class.

Mike looked over at her with a quirked eyebrow, still expecting an answer to his question. Eleven grinned at him and took a second to admire the speckling of freckles across his cheeks, their pattern like pretty paint splatter, before looking back down at the cluff in front of her and responding.

"I'm looking for a four-leaf clover, obviously," she replied, her focus zoning back in as she carefully examined each individual trefoil.

"You're not going to find one," he responded flatly.

"Not with that attitude."

"My attitude doesn't change anything."

"You don't know that."

Mike sighed, relenting.

Their school bags had been thrown carelessly to the side as they had originally come to study for finals which were starting less than a week away. They were both huge procrastinators so attempting to study together was never truly successful unless one of the others was also around to scold them for slacking. That day no one else was available, Max and Lucas having gone on a date and Dustin and Will both working. Eleven felt bad for the boys, that they were missing out on such incredible weather.

"It's only the beginning of summer, there will be plenty of days like

this,” Mike commented. Apparently Eleven had voiced her concern aloud.

“Plenty of days to go to the lake and get ice cream and swim at the pool,” Eleven agreed, humming blissfully.

“How old are you again?” Mike teased.

“You’re only as old as you feel.”

“So somewhere between five and seven then.”

“That sounds about right.”

They quieted. Eleven ran her hand through the clovers and grass, drawing in the scent of dirt and plants and nature. It was lovely out there, with no sounds of streets or people or the hum of the city, with no high schoolers, with no parents, no responsibilities. Well, there were responsibilities but they were ones she could ignore for the time being.

She looked over at Mike again and saw his fingers fiddling and fumbling at his sides, gripping at the grass beside him, pulling and tugging at the blades.

“What’s up with you?” she asked and his hands froze. “You’re off today.”

He didn’t respond at first, probably trying to find the right words. Then he huffed and sat up, Eleven copying him and crossing her legs, watching him warily.

“My dad hasn’t been home in a few days,” Mike finally informed her, his eyes on the ground and his voice absent of emotion.

Eleven immediately understood.

“How’s your mom?” she asked gently, familiar with the situation.

“Normal,” he scoffed and shook his head. “It’s like she’s just given up at this point.”

“Would you rather her be frantic and worried like she usually is?”

“At least it showed she cared.”

They sat in silence for a moment, Eleven nibbling at her lip. Mike always got quiet and depressed when his parents were having problems. Which was basically all the time at that point. She almost wished they would just call it quits and separate so they would stop torturing their son and probably his sisters too. They were all just holding their breaths, waiting for the inevitable, for the tension to clear.

“I kinda know how you feel,” she muttered and moved closer to him, placing a hand on his jean-clad knee, rubbing her thumb against the fabric. “My mom’s been MIA lately too.”

“How’s the Chief?” Mike inquired and finally looked up at her, giving her a small sympathetic grin, his eyes soft and sad.

“He’s how he always is.” Eleven shrugged dismissally. “Drinking all day, missing work. Forgetting he has a daughter.”

“Right.” Mike nodded, unsure that he would expect anything else from Hopper. He had been that way since Sarah and he wasn’t showing any signs of wanting to change.

Eleven couldn’t wait for senior year. Her plans were to get a job and get a car, in that order, and then save up so that she could move out as soon as she graduated. She probably wouldn’t be able to go to college right away with that plan, but that was one small sacrifice she had to make in order to get out of the house. Eleven was tired of watching her father mope around all day, scotch permanently tainting his breath, of her mother tip-toeing home late at night with another man’s cologne emanating off her, of the whispered fights and the yelling fights and the slamming of doors. It was depressing and frustrating and annoying and Eleven had had enough.

Mike reached up and hooked his arm around Eleven’s shoulder, pulling her close so the sides of their heads pressed against each other. She wrapped her arm across his waist and adjusted her head so it was resting against his shoulder instead.

“Promise me we’ll be best friends like this forever,” he proposed gently. Eleven could feel the vibrations of his voice against her cheek.

“Yeah, I promise,” she hummed happily. Mike was the person she felt the closest to in the whole world, Max was a close second, and she never wanted that to change.

“And,” he added conspiratorially, “if we get old and we’re still alone we should just marry each other.”

Eleven scoffed.

“Are you proposing to me right now?”

“Only because marrying you is slightly – *marginally* – better than dying alone.”

“You’re lucky I have very low standards because no girl would ever find that proposal to be romantic.”

“Well, it’s a good thing it’s not supposed to be romantic. Anyway, will you marry me or not?”

Eleven paused, pretending to mull it over and Mike pinched her arm, drawing a giggle out of her.

“Yes, fine. Alright,” she agreed, pretending it was a reluctant decision.

“Pinky?” he prompted, and lifted the aforementioned finger in front of her face.

She rolled her eyes at his childishness but obliged and raised her hand, linking their pinky fingers together.

“Pinky.”

present

Eleven was determined not to spill her wine. It was red and the carpet was white and she didn’t think Max would want the floor stained pink. It wouldn’t match the drapes. So her focus had been

fully on the glass in her hand when she bumped into the side of the couch, stabbing her toe on the foot of it.

“Wow, I hate my life,” she grit out, although noted victoriously that she had still managed not to spill.

“Why? Did you see Ivy’s instagram post?” Max asked, unaware of her friend’s pain from where she sat on the couch, captivated by the screen of her phone.

“Why would I ever look at Ivy’s instagram?” Eleven responded rhetorically, her teeth still clenched as she examined her toe for any damage.

“I don’t know, that’s why I asked. You said you hated your life.”

“Because I stubbed my toe.”

“Well that’s dramatic.”

“Do you even know me?”

“Fair enough.”

Eleven hobbled over to join the redhead on the couch, passing her a glass of wine as she did so. Lucas was out with the boys and Max had a nicer tv, so they had decided to have their movie night at her place. The downside was that all of the couple’s furniture was expensive and fancy and stains were a cardinal sin, so Eleven had to be much more careful with her food and drink than she was at home.

A couple of days had passed since the party, and while Eleven had received a merciless lecture from her friend for a couple hours, she had been forgiven for her actions once she promised she wouldn’t approach Mike from then on. Eleven selfishly noted that she hadn’t agreed to anything should Mike approach her instead, however.

“What’s wrong with her instagram anyway?” she asked, leaning over to see what Max was looking at on her phone.

Mike’s fiancee had posted a photo of them at their engagement party. Ivy was beaming happily at the camera, her hand visible, showing off

her ring, while Mike was kissing her on the cheek, his face basically hidden. The caption was something about being the luckiest woman on the planet and finding her soulmate – Eleven hardly skimmed over that part.

“I just thought it might be depressing for you to see,” Max explained, watching her friend’s face closely for any sort of reaction.

“Well, it’s not. It’s mostly just cheesy and predictable.”

“I love her username, ‘poisonivy.’”

“Yeah, at least she’s self-aware.”

“Don’t be mean.”

“I’m not being mean. I admit that it’s clever. Sort of.”

They changed the topic and began debating which movie to watch. Eleven wanted to see something new, since Max had her television hooked up to stream almost any existing movie, but Max was intent on convincing her to watch a romantic comedy. Then the doorbell rang.

They exchanged confused looks.

“Who’s that?” Eleven asked, expecting Max to know since it was her house.

“I don’t know, I’m not expecting anyone.” The redhead shrugged, then placed her glass down on the coffee table (on a coaster, of course) and stood up to get the door.

Eleven followed her, curious to see who the visitor was. Maybe someone gave a pizza place the wrong address. She definitely wouldn’t have a problem with that.

Max unlocked the white mahogany front door, not bothering with the peephole, and swung it open to reveal a petite blonde woman on the other side. It was Ivy, in all her blue-eyed, red-lipped glory. The two other girls were surprised, to say the least.

"Hey," she greeted sociably, giving them a smile. "Mike said you guys would be here."

They exchanged a look of confusion, and then Max responded with a friendly smile.

"Hi, yeah, it's our movie night since the boys are out," she explained, then opened the door wider and stepped back. "Did you want to come in?"

Eleven wanted to shake her head at Max, insisting that this would be a bad idea, but that wouldn't be smart when she was in plain view.

"Um, sure," Ivy accepted the offer shyly and grinned appreciatively as she stepped inside and Max closed the door behind her.

When Eleven made eye contact with the blonde she forced a polite smile. She always felt awkward in Ivy's presence. For obvious reasons.

"What are you doing here?" Max asked curiously.

"Actually I was hoping I could talk to Eleven for a minute," Ivy responded, then quickly corrected herself, looking apologetically at Max. "Not to be rude, I'm sorry."

The two girls exchanged yet another look, Eleven simultaneously trying to hide her fear about being alone with Ivy from her but convey it to Max. Max received the message but bit her lip and Eleven knew she was a goner. They couldn't exactly deny Ivy a private conversation with Eleven without coming off as weird and a little sketchy.

"Sure, don't worry," Max assured her, then moved to leave the hallway of the entrance. "I'll just go pour you a glass of wine, if you want it?"

"Oh, I can't say no to that," Ivy replied appreciatively. Max nodded at her and then left the room, giving Eleven a brief, warning look before disappearing.

Ivy was acting very cordially and polite so Eleven couldn't imagine

she had found out about her and Mike. Most people would be furious, probably banging on the door and barging in. Possibly wielding a shotgun. Eleven had thought about what she would do in that situation endless times. She wasn't prepared for a softspoken, genial girl to approach her in this way about the affair.

"Listen, um, Eleven," Ivy began, her voice hesitant but sweet like syrup.

"You can call me El," Eleven interrupted, smiling at her like it was some sort of peace offering.

"Oh, okay, El." She seemed relieved, probably because calling a person a number just felt too strange coming out of her mouth. A lot of people felt that way. She quirked an eyebrow at her. "Why do people call you Eleven anyway?"

"I've just asked to be called that for as long as I can remember." Eleven shrugged, accustomed to the question. "I have no idea how it started, to be honest."

"Oh. Well, I think it's pretty cool." Ivy grinned and Eleven tried not to bristle at the compliment.

"Thanks."

"So, I wanted to come talk to you because you and Mike are really close, obviously," Ivy started and Eleven froze, unsure how to react. "I mean, he changed the rules of the wedding in order to make you his 'Best Woman' so clearly you mean a lot to him"

She didn't know how to respond, so she waited in awkward silence for Ivy to continue, avoiding her eyes. Is this the part where she calls her out? Where she turns into a vengeful woman thirsting after Eleven's blood?

"And once we're married, before that even, I'm sure we'll be spending a lot of time together. Since we have to share Mike, after all," Ivy joked a little, blinking her big clueless eyes at Eleven.

You have no idea, Eleven couldn't help but think.

“And I really don’t want it to be awkward or weird or anything. So I’m really hoping we can be friends.”

Eleven blinked in shock. That was it? No tantrum? No shrieking, hair-pulling cat fight?

“That’s, um-“ Eleven uttered, unable to come up with an answer.

“Only if you want to, of course,” Ivy added, looking at her hopefully.

Eleven thought it over. She couldn’t possibly be rude towards Ivy and reject her offer. Ivy wouldn’t understand and would probably reach the conclusion that Mike’s best friend was just a downright bitch. At the same time, whenever Eleven looked at Ivy, she kind of wanted her head to blow up. Not in a malicious way, just a convenient one. Like, if Ivy disappeared a lot of Eleven’s issues would too.

But she needed to be mature. She needed to act like a grown up and be civil and extend an olive branch. Mostly because she didn’t want to cause problems for Mike. Eleven would take this one for the team.

“Alright,” she agreed after a moment, then twitched her lips up in what she hoped was a welcoming smile.

Ivy sighed in relief, her shoulders relaxing. Eleven wasn’t sure why she cared so much that they were friends. But she was going to go along with it for now.

“Do you want to join us for movie night?” she offered, fighting down a cringe. She wouldn’t be able to complain about her life to Max now. It was one of her rare opportunities to be honest about a big part of her life to someone and she had just thrown it out the window. Oh well.

“That would be awesome, thanks,” Ivy eagerly agreed and Eleven turned towards the kitchen where Max was probably still hiding out and motioned to follow her.

This was going to be interesting.

Notes for the Chapter:

i know a lot of people want to not like ivy which makes sense because its just easier lmao but what kind of writer would i be if i didnt torture you? there could be components to her that we havent seen yet which might make people feel a little less guilty for shipping mileven here though, dont worry ;)

lol okay so theres a little more mileven interaction here thats definitely a lot purer than last chapter which is good because their friendship is definitely deeper and more meaningful than it probably seemed.

anyway, unfortunately im going out of town for a couple of weeks and i havent written any more of this so i probably wont be able to update this while im away :/ i will probably be updating my other fic tho (i just added a new chapter if you havent read it yet), so watch out for that.

let me know what you think (even if you hate me for not making ivy seem like a horrible person yet lolz) :)

3. all the heads keep turning in my mind like parachutes

Notes for the Chapter:

title is from 'wildwood' by fleurie.

i am SO sorry that this took me so long to update. like i said i was gone a couple of weeks and i hoped i would have more time to work on this but i kind of didn't because my other fic is kind of my first priority. and then when i got back things were really crazy for a whole week so i wrote most of this in the last three hours just to get an update out lol.

that being said, i do have a bit of an outline for this fic now which helps lol. not sure if i really enjoy this chapter, but hopefully u guys like it.

also, since the flashbacks are based on the amount of time before the present, for reference everyone in the present is about 22 - 23.

side note, i haven't actually seen any of the star wars so i could only go off things i saw online for the discussion that happens in this chapter lmao.

thanks for reading :)

a year and a half earlier

Eleven was nauseous. And as much as she wanted to pretend, it was not because of the cocktail she had to drink on an empty stomach.

"Are you going to be nice?" Max asked suddenly from her seat across from Eleven's, looking up from her phone to eye her best friend warily and subsequently noticing the green tint to her face. "You okay?"

"That's a loaded question," Eleven responded gravely before gulping

down her glass of water.

The restaurant wasn't too busy yet as it was only four in the afternoon, but happy hour had hit and Eleven was expecting the seats nearby to fill quickly. Not to mention the additional five empty chairs at the table she and Max were sitting at. The boys would be arriving soon, along with Mike's brand spanking new girlfriend.

"El, you have to be cool," Max advised her carefully, watching with alarmed eyes as Eleven suddenly choked on the water and started hacking up a lung. The few customers around them immediately ceased conversation and stared until Eleven's breathing was nearly back to normal.

"I'm *so* cool," Eleven managed to wheeze out, attempting to give the redhead a convincing grin that appeared more like a pained grimace.

"Okay, don't do that," Max recommended, not bothering to hide her cringe at the distorted look of her friend's face.

Eleven sighed exasperatedly and reached for the jug of water in the middle of the table, proceeding to fill her glass to the brim. She failed to hold back a nervous belch as she did so and Max winced.

"Do you need to go throw up or something?" she asked, putting her phone down and picking up the menu instead. "Can you do it before everyone gets here?"

"No, I'm just – ugh," Eleven answered incoherently, bringing the water to her lips again and spilling a little down the front of her shirt due to the incessant bouncing of her leg.

"We talked about this," Max cautioned, widening her eyes dramatically. "You lost your privilege to be jealous a long time ago."

"I'm not jealous, oh my God," Eleven groaned, sitting back in her seat and massaging her temples with her fingers.

"Do we need to go over this again?" Max drawled, rolling her eyes and putting the menu back down before leaning forward and lowering her voice conspiratorially. "Jennifer Haye's party."

“We agreed that we don’t discuss that,” Eleven grit out, flashing her a threatening look.

“Miranda kissed Mike on the *cheek* and you went ballistic.”

“You say that like she didn’t have ulterior motives. Plus, that was ages ago.”

“That was two months ago. Jennifer has not stopped complaining about you since then.”

“Well, that’s rude.”

“You broke her mother’s heirloom vase, what do you expect?”

“Okay, but the real question is who puts an expensive and fragile item like that on the kitchen counter?”

“El.”

The brunette sighed and shut her mouth, leaning further into her seat, wanting the floor to swallow her whole so she wouldn’t have to deal with this right now.

“I just don’t think this Ivy girl is Mike’s type,” she mumbled, fiddling with the hem of her flowery skirt.

“She’s the first girl Mike’s ever dated, how do you even know what his type would be?” Max challenged, quirking an eyebrow.

“Maybe not dating is his type,” Eleven murmured, avoiding her friend’s glowering eyes.

“Just because that’s your type doesn’t mean it’s his,” Max reasoned, then noticed Eleven’s obvious misery and sighed, surrendering and ridding her voice of its edge. “Listen. If you really hate it just let me know and we can leave early. We’ll pretend you have food poisoning or something.”

Eleven immediately brightened up, straightening up in her seat and beaming at her dearly loved best friend.

“But,” Max continued, pointing an accusatory finger. “You have to be nice.”

“I can do that,” Eleven agreed and her nerves settled just the slightest bit. At least she had an out. “We need to have a signal, like maybe I’ll give you a little kick—”

“Shut up, they’re coming,” Max hissed and then plastered a huge, fake smile to her lips, looking in the direction of the doors. Eleven followed her gaze and saw Mike approaching the table with a petite blonde girl in tow, their hands intertwined.

Her heart jumped into her throat.

“Hey, guys,” Mike greeted, waving at Max and then dropping Ivy’s hand to hug Eleven, his arms sliding around her waist and her arms reaching up snug around the back of his neck.

Over his shoulder, she saw a flash of confusion cross the pretty blonde’s face and selfishly she savoured her small victory. And then she felt like slapping herself for acting like a child.

“This is Ivy,” Mike introduced them once he had pulled back from Eleven. He turned to take Ivy’s hand again, tugging her slightly forward and giving her a sweet look which she returned with a timid grin. “Ivy, this is Max and Eleven.”

“Nice to meet you,” Max greeted genially, then motioned for her them to take a seat. Eleven almost wanted to start a timer to see how long it would take for Max to get comfortable and let her authentically blunt personality shine through.

The couple sat down, Mike next to Eleven and Ivy next to Max so that they were across from each other.

Oh good, Eleven thought bitterly, now they can make heart eyes across the table for the next hour.

Then she realized this meant they couldn’t hold hands underneath the table and that made her feel better. She grabbed her glass of water, finished it off and tracked down the nearest waiter while Max and Ivy made small talk.

“So, what is it you were in school for again?” Max asked politely.

Eleven wondered why she was pretending that Mike had told them anything about this girl besides that they had met because she was the daughter of one of his dad’s friends or coworkers or something. The whole thing sounded a little like a set-up to her but that was probably just wishful thinking.

“Oh, I’m about to graduate with a Bachelor of Education,” Ivy answered shyly, “Luckily, the school I did my practicum at is willing to hire me in the fall.”

“High school?” Eleven chimed in, her eyebrows falling together as she thought of all the teenaged boys that were going to cream their pants when their new teacher sauntered into the classroom. The purple summer dress Ivy was wearing was tight around the chest and hips and then flared out around her thighs, and Eleven was only slightly envious of her slim figure and long, *long* legs.

“No, elementary school,” Ivy said, “I love kids.”

For some reason she gave Mike a special look after saying so and Eleven couldn’t help but wonder the hell why. Mike didn’t exactly have the intuition needed to smoothly interact with children. Sure, kids are never really bothered if the person they’re talking to is lacking social skills, but Mike always looked horribly awkward whenever he had to entertain a child for a few minutes.

Eleven grabbed the attention of the waiter then, who flocked over to gather their drink orders. They waited to order any food out of courtesy to the boys who had yet to arrive.

“Where are the guys, anyway?” Max asked once the waiter had left to the kitchen, directing this question to Mike.

“They had nothing to do this afternoon so they went to see the new Star Wars movie,” Mike explained, his attention mostly focused on the menu in his hands.

“Wait, again?” Ivy asked, sporting a confused look. Then she turned to the girls and scrunched up her face. “I’ve never really been into

any of that nerdy stuff.”

Max laughed respectfully at her comment but Eleven involuntarily wrinkled her nose before she could stop herself.

What the hell was a girl who didn’t like nerdy things doing dating Mike Wheeler, the living embodiment of nerdiness? He still spent a fortune collecting comic books and sported a sweater vest on an almost daily basis. He had admitted to Eleven that one of the reasons he was attracted to her was because she reminded him of Princess Leia. She hadn’t taken that very well.

Ivy was clearly the opposite. She was probably subscribed to *Cosmopolitan*, constantly on a new type of diet, and kept up with the Kardashians. Not that there was anything wrong with any of those things. It was just that they were so *not* Mike’s type. They were so *not* Eleven.

“Isn’t being a teacher kind of nerdy though?”

The question was out of her mouth before she knew it and she saw Mike and Max snap their heads towards her, obviously appalled. Ivy looked a little taken aback, eyeing Eleven like she was trying to figure her out. Then she recovered and smiled.

“I guess I hadn’t thought of it like that before,” she agreed, shrugging and reaching for her water glass, a polite smile glued to her face.

Out of the corner of her eye, Eleven saw Mike’s face relax, apparently impressed by Ivy’s ability to handle Eleven’s occasional snark, and watch the blonde girl with nothing but admiration. Eleven sighed.

They could hear the boys enter the building before they saw them. Talking over each other as usual, voices unnecessarily loud. They rollicked over to the table, boisterous for the whole trip over, and then silence cascaded over them like a cold splash of water as their eyes fell upon Ivy.

“Hey boys,” Mike greeted cheerily, but Eleven felt like he looked nervous. Like maybe the guys wouldn’t approve of his girlfriend. She was unable to think of a feasible reason for that though.

They went through introductions, and the guys sat down, Dustin on Eleven's other side and Lucas on Max's and Will on the end.

"Are you sure you're dating Mike?" Dustin asked, bordering the line of playful and serious as he eyed Ivy. "You're like really pretty. And he's, well, you know."

"Dustin!" Mike scolded, his face flushing.

"Thanks, Dustin," Ivy replied smoothly, tucking a blonde curl behind her ear and turning to Mike to wink at him. "But I actually find Mike to be very attractive."

Mike immediately brightened up, grinning widely at Ivy as the tips of his ears burned red and Eleven had to restrain herself from rolling her eyes.

"How was Star Wars for the third time?" Eleven asked to change the subject, turning to Dustin.

"Awesome, as always," Dustin replied.

"When Leia showed up, I almost cried," Eleven said.

"I just loved the porgs," Max added.

"Yeah, but when Luke—" Lucas began.

"Hey, spoilers!" Mike interrupted, then gestured to the girl across from him. "Ivy hasn't seen it."

Everyone stopped, unsure what to say. Star Wars was one of their group's *things*, a movie franchise they had marathoned together at multiple sleepovers when they were teenagers, that they would probably continue to marathon together as long as they were all friends. Being unable to discuss a Star Wars movie was unfamiliar territory.

"It's okay." Ivy shrugged, obviously feeling awkward that she was somehow disturbing their conversation. "I probably won't see it anyway."

After a moment of hesitation, the rest of the group quickly plunged into comparisons, critiques and compliments towards the film, debating the choices of the writers and actors and everyone in between. While Mike seemed to resist joining in at first as some form of solidarity with Ivy, he was soon no longer able to hold back when Yoda was brought up.

Out of the corner of her eye, Eleven couldn't help but notice Ivy's subsequent awkwardness. She acted engaged in the conversation and attempted to contribute but she was totally lost on the topic and eventually gave up, sitting back in her seat and scrolling through her Instagram feed. Eleven sort of felt bad, not wanting to purposefully exclude anyone. But that small, bitter voice inside her reminded her that if Ivy just didn't fit in with the dynamics of the group, nothing could really change that. They wouldn't change just for her.

So she pretended not to see when Ivy tried and failed to get Mike's attention and instead sunk her chin into her hand, resting her elbow on the table and looking entirely sullen.

present

The venue was huge. It was impressive, with three stories and thick columns supporting the balconies, its stone wall a washed out blush color with large, arched windows flanking small, rectangular ones. Symmetrical and elegant, the trim of the windows was white and fluted, and the roof sloped up in a point in the middle with turrets on each end of the roofline.

It was sort of pretty, but also reminded Eleven of abandoned mental asylums. It was very blocky and tall and imposing, towering over her with intimidation, daring her to step inside. She couldn't imagine ever wanting to get married inside that building.

She shuffled where she stood on the sidewalk, then looked over at Mike, who was also squinting up at the building, and frowned.

"I feel like this place is haunted."

"It is. Says so right in the pamphlet," he replied, reaching into the back pocket of his jeans and pulling out a crinkled leaflet and

opening it up.

“Oh my god.”

“Yeah, apparently a bride was murdered on her wedding day.”

“You have to be joking.”

“Nope. And now if you hang out on the second floor late at night,” Mike began to whisper, dramatically widening his eyes as he leaned sinisterly in closer to Eleven’s face. “You can hear her crying and moaning, doomed forever to wander the hallways.”

He suddenly reached over and squeezed Eleven’s sides, causing her to let out the tiniest squeal. She instantly slapped his hands away, glaring at him as he started laughing at her.

“Why the fuck does Ivy want to get married here?”

“I don’t think she’s read that part yet,” Mike said, still grinning, then shrugged. “Besides, we’re just checking it out for now.”

Ivy was busy taking care of some things to get ready to teach in the fall, so she had sent Mike on a mission to check out some of the wedding venues she was interested in. So Mike, of course, enlisted Eleven to go with him to get a second opinion.

As if Eleven had any interest in interior design or knew anything about what Ivy might like. She knew Mike probably just wanted some company. Especially if he was going to a haunted hotel.

A woman suddenly came trotting out of the French entrance doors, an older blonde lady in a red blouse and black pants with a clunky necklace and clacking heels. She spotted them immediately and bumbled over, a giant smile on her face.

“Hello, Mr. Wheeler,” she greeted enthusiastically, “My name is Carla Dixon, I’m the manager of the Rundlett Hotel and I’ll be giving you the tour. We very much appreciate your consideration of our fine establishment for your wedding venue.”

Mike greeted her, nodding and shaking her hand before she turned

and saw Eleven silently watching the encounter, standing a little further back.

“Oh, I didn’t realize your fiancee would be joining you,” Carla commented, reaching for Eleven’s hand and shaking it excitedly as well, her manicured nails glinting in the sunlight. “Congratulations on your engagement, I’m sure this is a very exciting time for you both.”

Frozen in place, Eleven barely registered what this motormouth was saying. When she finally realized, the lady had turned away and was encouraging them to follow her inside.

“Oh, wait, I’m not-“

“Come along, we have a lot of things to see,” she carried on, gesturing for them to hurry up.

Mike looked over his shoulder at Eleven and shrugged at her and the fact that he was willing to pretend that they were engaged for an afternoon settled strangely in her stomach. Carla hadn’t given her a chance to protest in the first place, but wouldn’t most guys want to immediately correct someone if they mistook someone else for their fiancee? More importantly, did Mike and Eleven actually look to Carla like they could be a couple?

She was probably overthinking it so she swallowed all of her thoughts down and pushed on after them.

The inside was just as majestic and only slightly less creepy with high ceilings and a large staircase and sophisticatedly patterned wallpaper. A giant, sparkling chandelier hung down over the lobby area which was extremely red. Red rug, red chairs, red wooden coffee tables. It kind of looked like a bloodbath. She voiced this observation to Mike while Carla wasn’t listening and they both started giggling like children.

The manager quickly showed them to the massive ballroom where the reception would take place and it was a very different atmosphere, dominated by the colours of the white walls and brown wood panelling with a dark patterned carpet and intricate patterns

along the top of the walls. The tables were round with white tablecloths and dishes and a little vase of white roses as centerpieces, the chairs were copper coloured with gold trim, the backs rounded and curved. It was really beautiful.

“We can seat about 400 people here,” Carla informed them proudly as they admired the decoration of the room. “And obviously, we can customize a lot of different elements based on your preferences.”

They nodded quietly, taking in the space.

“Did you have any themes or colours in mind?”

It took Eleven a moment to realize that Carla had directed the question at her, noting how Mike was also staring at her with an odd smirk on his face as he waited for her answer. She flushed.

“Um, no, not yet,” she responded shyly, tucking her hair behind her ear. She really hoped Mike and Ivy didn’t end up choosing this place for their wedding to avoid the confusion the manager would have to face when a blonde and blue-eyed girl showed up instead.

“Well, time is of the essence,” Carla advised her, looking a little disturbed by her reply, and Eleven crumbled more into herself. “Two months is not a lot of time to plan.”

Eleven almost needed to reach a hand up to stop her jaw from falling open. When Carla turned and started walking further into the room, rambling about the effect the atmosphere would have on the guests, Eleven turned to Mike and gaped at him.

“Two months?” she asked quietly. His gaze went to the floor as he nibbled on his lip guiltily. “Since when are you getting married in two months?”

“Since last week.” Mike shrugged, finally looking up to make eye contact. He looked calm but resigned, like it was something he was initially opposed to but finally conceded to after enough pleading and insisting on Ivy’s part. “I don’t know, Ivy just decided she wanted to tie the knot before the school semester started so that she wouldn’t be too stressed out with her new job and planning a wedding on top of

that.”

“But that’s...,” Eleven frowned, looking away from him and muttering to herself. “I thought I had more time.”

“More time for what?” Mike’s eyebrows fell together as he studied her, confused by her comment.

“Nothing,” she instantly insisted, pushing back the dark cloud that was beginning to rumble through her mind. “Nevermind.”

Eleven was going to lose him. He was going to get married and things were never going to be the same. He would forget about her, too busy doting over his new wife. He would forget everything they were, everything they had. There were only two months left and then he would forget *MikeandEl*.

She looked up and immediately saw the concern written on Mike’s face as he stared at her, the melancholy of her thoughts had obviously shown on her own face. Eleven was about to assure him that she was fine but Carla was calling at them from across the room.

“Excuse me, lovebirds,” she declared, a sneaky smile on her face. Eleven wanted to smack it off. “I know you’re smitten for each other, and it’s really very darling, but I do have another appointment in half an hour.”

They blushed, avoiding eye contact with each other as they hustled towards the manager and she spied their rosy cheeks with amusement. Eleven really wanted this to be over.

The rest of the tour consisted of Carla showing them the different options they had for rooms to stay in and the large dressing rooms they had for the bride and bridesmaids and the groom and groomsmen to get ready in together. She then went over what they offered for catering as well as possibilities for music, informing them that it was all very affordable compared to many other places. Eleven sort of wondered if that was because they had a wedding go very, very wrong in the past.

Finally, Carla thanked them again for visiting and passed them her

business card to get in contact with her once they made a decision and then hurried off to greet her next clients, leaving Mike and Eleven alone in the lobby.

"Well, that was fun," Eleven said, and Mike nodded as he toyed with Carla's card. "So, do you like it?"

"Like what?" he asked, his mind obviously elsewhere.

Eleven raised her eyebrows and gestured to their surroundings.

"Oh, um, yeah." Mike shrugged, sighing. "The ballroom is really nice. But my opinion isn't really the one that matters."

"Why wouldn't it matter?" Eleven asked, frowning at him.

"Ivy gets to call the shots," Mike replied, almost dejectedly. "Her parents are paying for everything, so it makes sense."

"I guess that's fair," Eleven admitted, and then she scoffed. "Was all of this for nothing then?"

Mike cracked a mischevious smile, like he had a whole plan concocted entirely to torture Eleven with a boring tour of a haunted hotel. What was next? Tasting different wedding cakes in a haunted bakery?

"You're unbelievable," she mumbled, and reached out to push him away from her, wanting to wipe his smirk off his face.

"Oh, come on," Mike complained as he stumbled back a little, his eyes sparkling. "Ivy wanted me to go and I didn't want to suffer alone."

"How considerate," Eleven mocked, crossing her arms. But the way Mike was looking at her was causing her annoyance to falter.

"Besides, I kind of just wanted to see you." Mike shrugged. She knew where this was going. "We haven't exactly been able to hang out a whole lot lately."

Did he think she didn't know that? Mike was always the one flaking,

cancelling plans and never rescheduling. He took forever to respond to Eleven's texts and when he did it was always something simple like 'okay' or 'lol.' He was drifting away, slowly but surely, and now it sounded like he was trying to blame that on her?

"That's not my fault," she told him.

"Yeah," he sighed, his grin falling from his face. "I know."

They stood together in silence then. And as Mike focused on folding the business card as many times as possible, Eleven considered just walking away and calling for a taxi. This wasn't how they used to be, how they should be. It used to be so easy to be together. But now every conversation gravitated to the wedding or Ivy or how their friendship was falling apart for unknown but simultaneously obvious reasons.

The problem was clear but hidden underneath denial and ignorance and painful pasts. It was too late now to label it, to call it what it was. That would throw everything off kilter even more.

Eleven took a deep breath.

"Mike, I think I'm going to-

Suddenly he was on her, his hands shaking but firmly gripping her face as he captured her lips between his in the middle of the hotel lobby. Eleven drank it in, her eyes falling shut as the familiarity of him overpowered her, sinking her into that blissful place her mind went when he had his arms around her. She responded dutifully, her fingers drifting up into his hair, into those wild, curly locks.

She wasn't too surprised, he always got clingy whenever they brought up an issue either between him and Ivy or with their own relationship. Basically, whenever he was sad or frustrated or lonely. Eleven didn't necessarily like being associated with such negative emotions and she missed the times they had when he was single and happy and always attached to her hip. But they were friends and friends were supposed to be there for each other. So that's what she did.

Someone cleared their throat and they sprang away from each other, looking over at the front desk attendant who raised his eyebrows at them in annoyance, hinting that they should take their displays of affection elsewhere.

They shared a look, both wanting to laugh but stifling it, and that shine of Mike's eyes, the one that never failed to captivate Eleven, was back. She barely registered him taking her hand and leading her back the way they had come, to one of the dressing rooms Carla had showed them. His eyes quickly swepted over the area, and finding no one, he pulled her inside with him, locking the door behind them.

Then their kiss resumed, hot and purposeful, and Mike was hastily steering Eleven towards the countertop, gripping underneath her thighs to lift her up onto the surface effortlessly. His mouth latched onto her neck, grazing over its curve and making her shiver. He was thumbing at the hem of Eleven's shirt and she was reaching for the buttons of his shirt when he pulled away, worry tinting his face.

"Did you hear that?" he whispered, looking around with concern, and Eleven froze, stopping to listen.

There was nothing. Besides some distant voices and the whirr of the air conditioning, but otherwise-

"It's the ghost bride!" Mike exclaimed theatrically, digging his fingers into her sides again to tickle her and laughing. She jumped and started squirming.

"Stop! You're such an idiot," she cried and Mike muffled her laughter with his mouth.

It was easy.

Notes for the Chapter:

as always, let me know what you think :)

4. my heart is an angel, twisted and tangled

Notes for the Chapter:

chapter title is from 'say so' by terror jr

i cannot believe im posting this. i honestly thought i wouldn't get anything written for another couple of days and yet, here i am, up way past my bedtime to finish this chapter (and not edit it oops).

if anyone wants to know why i disappeared, i gave a detailed explanation in the note for the latest chapter on my other story, but i'll sum it up for you if you don't wanna read it. i had a combination of various illnesses and a lack of motivation. that's it, basically.

idk if anyone has figured out but this is kind of a puzzle piece fic. hints of why eleven and mike are the way they are will pop up in every flashback, and this chapter is one of the first big ones.

thanks for reading!

eight years earlier

The beeping was rhythmic, toneless, incessant.

If Eleven paid too much attention to it she would surely be driven to madness. The endless tangle of wires and tubes was additionally overwhelming, she was never really sure what was attached to where. The constant shuffling of shoes on the vinyl just outside the door, the coming and going of people in blue and green and black. The same questions, the same answers, the same fragile tones.

It was all so easy to get sick of.

"Headache?"

Eleven lifted her chin from her palm and looked up at her sister.

She was grinning. Her blonde hair had disintegrated, her skin had paled almost to transparency, she had a plastic tube sticking up into her nostrils and a catheter constantly poking into the skin of her hand, and she was grinning.

“Only a little,” Eleven hummed, then gestured vaguely to the ceiling.
“Bright lights.”

“We can turn them off if you want,” Sara suggested softly, her hand flipping the page of a glossy magazine. She was dressed in her usual blue gown, the white cotton blanket of the hospital bed draped across her legs. She was always cold.

“You’re reading,” Eleven disagreed, shrugging.

“No, I’m just looking at the pictures,” Sara admitted and then giggled a little. Her laugh was one of those tittering, contagious ones. Eleven’s lips twitched into a smile.

“You still need light to do that.”

“Mm, I might just want to nap anyway.” Sara’s blue eyes cast down as if she were ashamed. It was no secret that she spent 20 hours of the day sleeping now, but she still didn’t like admitting to her weakness.

“Okay,” Eleven mumbled and stood up from her chair, thumbing the light switch off.

The room descended into a dark blue, the light that filtered through the blinds of the windows casting a muted glow through the air. Eleven felt like she had been submerged underwater, like she was in one of those tanks at the aquarium.

“Come here,” Sara instructed gently, gesturing to sit down on the bed with her.

Eleven obeyed, and Sara scooted over so that she could sit beside her, the brunette leaning her head on her sister’s bony shoulder. She automatically reached for that blue elastic band Sara always had strapped to her wrist despite her lack of hair and began fiddling with it.

Eleven was younger by two years but the age difference between them had always been but a number. Her sister was her mentor, her shoulder to cry on, her best friend. They had been trading secrets over braiding of hair, whining about their parents over painting of nails, and gossiping about boys over swapping of clothes for as long as Eleven could remember.

Life without Sara was the loneliest life Eleven could imagine.

“I need to tell you something,” Sara declared, her voice deliberate as if every word was carefully chosen. “I think it’s kind of important.”

“What is it?” Eleven frowned.

Sara hesitated. Her frail hand rose to Eleven’s head, sifting through the curly locks of chocolate brown hair there. Eleven waited, listening to Sara’s slow breaths and feeling the rise and fall of her chest.

Their parents had gone home to take much needed naps, enlisting Eleven to the duty of watching over her sister. It was starting to seem to her that she only existed to her parents in the context of Sara. As soon as she got sick, Eleven’s needs were pushed to the backburner. The priority was Sara’s treatments, Sara’s recovery, Sara’s sickness. It made sense, but Eleven was getting a little tired of having nothing to take for lunch to school because no one was able to do any grocery shopping.

Mike had noticed and had taken it upon himself to have his mother make an extra sandwich for every time that Eleven opened her bag and stared down at the wrinkled orange she had salvaged from the dusty fruit bowl.

“I want you to promise me something,” Sara finally continued and Eleven’s eyebrows fell together, anticipation rising in her stomach.

“Anything,” Eleven prompted Sara to go on.

“Promise me you won’t end up like our parents.”

Eleven blinked, then sat up so she could look at Sara’s face. So she could look at the washed out blue of Sara’s eyes, the colour of ice,

and the chapping of Sara's pink lips and her sunken cheeks.

"What do you mean? They don't – they aren't – "

"Ellie, please," Sara sighed. Every one of her exhales made Eleven's heart stop. "They don't love each other. They never have. They stay together even though they're obviously miserable. For us."

Eleven swallowed. Unconsciously, she knew this. Her home life had never seemed quite right to her. Their dinner table, their birthdays, their Christmases, something was always off. She realized finally when she entered her teens that it was because her parents didn't share any special looks, any loving words, any caring touches. There was always a looming tension between them that seemed like it might snap at any moment.

"Why are you telling me this now?" Eleven asked, terrified to hear the answer.

"Why do you think?" Sara attempted to joke, but sadness cascaded over her face like rain and a sudden coldness erupted in Eleven's veins.

"Sara, you can't," Eleven immediately began to panic, fearing the worst was getting nearer and nearer, her voice watery and shrill. "Please. Don't leave me here. Don't leave me here with them."

"Ellie," Sara cooed, her hand, tinted blue and so, so *cold*, coming up to cradle her sister's cheek. "You're going to be fine, I promise you. But you have to promise *me*. Promise me you will never suffer through a loveless relationship for any reason at all."

That's when Eleven could see it. She could see the end approaching, steadily like the gradual rumbling of a railroad, the sound escalating to an enormous thunder as a speeding, screeching train approached. She could see it in the dry swallow Sara took, the purple bags beneath her eyes, the fading of her irises.

"I promise, okay? But you just, you have to stay. You need to fight, you're going to make it!" Eleven was frantic now as she saw Sara's eyelids droop, as her head lolled back and her hand fell back to the

bed, as if those words were all she had been waiting for, holding out for. The tears came fast, clogging her vision and fiery hot as they trickled down her cheeks.

Eleven tore across the room to the door, ripping it open and screaming down the hallway.

“Nurse! Help! I need a nurse!”

She ran back into the room, rushing again to Sara’s side, taking her hand and gripping it tight, willing its warmth to return. Eleven didn’t know if anyone had heard her, if anyone was coming but all of that was quickly losing its importance.

“She’s telling me it’s time to go,” Sara’s voice suddenly rattled out, crisp and breathless.

Eleven looked up, hope swelling and embracing her heart. Her sister’s eyes were still closed, her face blank. Eleven’s mouth was dry, her lips sticky.

“Who?” she asked in a shuddering cry.

“It’s grandma,” Sara explained and the smallest of grins lifted her mouth like the last, tiniest kiss of life. “I’m going with her.”

“No, please,” Eleven gasped.

The beeping. Once rhythmic, toneless, and incessant, had become a single, resounding beep.

Sara was gone.

Nurses and doctors came bounding into the room, checking the machine, checking Sara’s pulse, calling out to her to see if there was any response.

But it was obvious with the ring of a stopped heart filling the room.

“Please,” Eleven whispered, watching Sara’s beautiful but vacant face until she was pulled from the room and her world flooded with despair.

present

Will was talented. Eleven had seen it in his playful drawings, his thick sketchbook when he was only a teenager. It had all come so easy to him, his strokes effortless, his face relaxed with concentration. And now he was talented enough to show his art for two nights in the local gallery.

Eleven was speechless as she had wandered the building, Will's emotions bleeding out onto canvases on the walls for anyone to see. Her favourite was his self-portrait. His eyes were knowing as they stared out and Eleven couldn't imagine painting herself, being able to incorporate everything she was and had been and would be into a single image.

She sauntered back over to the rest of the group after letting the eyes of Will's two-dimensional self bore into her face for too long.

"Did you see the self-portrait?" Eleven asked Max as she approached her. She looked gorgeous in a simple white, knee-length dress and black high heels.

"Yes, *incredible*," Max gushed, her eyes wide for emphasis.

They were all loitering around in the little area with leather seats and end tables and a small bar against the wall. Max and Lucas, Mike and Ivy, and Dustin and his new girlfriend, Madeline. She was nice but with a potty mouth akin to Dustin's and hesitant but skillful sass when the conversation called for it.

Eleven was the only one there without a date which she was trying not to be grumpy about. It wasn't that she wanted to have a date, per se, but more so that she wanted someone else to be there alone. So that she didn't feel like the odd one out, the seventh wheel.

"If he doesn't make a fortune tonight, I'm going to be pissed," Eleven asserted, raising her eyebrows threateningly.

"I mean, he's doing pretty well online," Lucas commented, shrugging. He was looking dapper as well, adorning a black blazer similar to the ones the other boys were wearing. "If something doesn't sell on here,

it'll get bought on his website in no time.”

“Yeah, doesn’t he have, like, a fan club?” Dustin asked, grinning. “I swear there are a bunch of girls that like comment on all of his instagram posts and tell him how hot he is.”

Eleven blinked.

“Do they know he’s gay?” she asked.

“Sure.” Mike smiled, laughing with the boys. “That doesn’t stop them from fangirling.”

He was wearing a black turtleneck that seemed to emphasize the stretch of his body, a black blazer fitting snugly over it. Ivy clung to his side, a manicured hand threaded elegantly through the crook of his elbow. She sported a long-sleeved, silvery dress that clung to her hips and cut off beneath the thighs. Her amazing legs were on show, as usual.

“Speaking of which,” Max began, her eyes roaming the room with a perfectly coiffed red eyebrow raised. “Has anyone spotted engagement party guy?”

“Wait, what?” Eleven gasped, her gaze also sweeping over the crowd of heads surrounding them. “That’s a thing?”

“Apparently,” Max confirmed, smirking. “This will be date number three.”

“No way!” Eleven resisted squealing like an embarrassing schoolgirl. “Why didn’t Will tell me?”

“I guess you’ve been kind of distracted lately.” Max shrugged, thumbing at the condensation that had formed on her glass of sparkling wine.

“Distracted?” Eleven’s eyebrows pinched together. She opened her mouth to figure out what Max meant by that but was interrupted before she could.

“So, what does everyone think?”

There was a round of cheers and sporadic clapping from the group of seven as the man of the night approached them. Will looked great in a snazzy blue suit, a black bowtie around his collar to top it off. He was glowing, his cheeks were flushed a little but a smile that was somehow crossed between shyness and pride lit up his face.

Everyone took turns hugging him, expressing their amazement over his work, asking him how he felt and how everything was going.

“We’ve sold about half of the collection so far,” Will informed them, his eyes growing wide with excitement.

“That’s crazy, man,” Dustin reached out to land a hand on Will’s shoulder, squeezing it supportively.

“You may have sold another one,” Eleven said, giving Will a playful smile. “I’ve got my eye on your self-portrait.”

“Please, no,” Will laughed. “As much as I love my work, I refuse to have to see my self-portrait hung up in your living room whenever I come over.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Eleven joked, then winked. “I would definitely be hanging it up in the bedroom.”

“You’re the worst,” Will rolled his eyes but chuckled nonetheless.

“Also, while I have your attention,” Eleven grabbed Will’s arm eagerly. “Why didn’t you tell me you’ve been seeing that guy from the engagement party?”

“To be fair, you haven’t exactly been very available lately,” Will defended himself. He said it casually enough, but the subtlest undertone of annoyance beneath his words caused Eleven to bristle slightly.

She looked over at Max who had conveniently cast her gaze elsewhere, sipping at her drink.

“What are you talking about?” Eleven demanded, truly confused. She didn’t understand what Will and Max meant, she spent almost of her free time with her friends. Except, of course, for when she was in a

particularly bad mood, which seemed to be happening often recently. Oh, wait.

“Listen, we’ll talk about it later,” Will assured her, easing her concerns slightly with a soft smile. With that, he bid everyone else a good night and slipped off into the crowd again.

While Eleven let her thoughts consume her, everyone else resumed casual conversation, talking about the paintings and the selection of wine and the venue and everything in between. Eleven, meanwhile, was realizing that her mood had been so sour the past couple of weeks that her friends seemed to think she was avoiding them.

And the worst part was the reason her mood was so sour was because of a wedding. A stupid, silly wedding that shouldn’t have any effect on her life if she was a normal person with boundaries and an ability to consider the consequences of her actions.

“Excuse me.”

Eleven was shook from her thoughts, startling slightly as she looked up to find a broad man towering over her. He was over six feet tall, his hair was dark and fluffy and his eyes were, daresay, smoldering.

“I just needed to tell you, you look beautiful this evening,” the man told her, his voice smooth and rich like honey.

Eleven blinked up at him. She felt like letting him know that she was definitely aware that she looked good in her short peach dress with its sparkly, beaded halter top that descended into a soft, flowy skirt, and she didn’t need anyone to assure her of that.

“Thank you.” She decided to be polite, blessing him with a sweet smile, and then turned her head away from him as if in dismissal.

“Do you think I could take you out sometime?” the man pressed on and Eleven internally groaned. So this was one of those guys that didn’t know how to take a hint.

“I appreciate the offer,” she began, turning her head in his direction again but barely making eye contact, “but I’m not interested, sorry.”

“Are you sure? I think you might find my company worthwhile.”

Eleven finally looked up at his face where she found a smug, toothy grin looking down on her and returned it with a frown.

“I’m afraid not.”

The man seemed to finally comprehend that he was being rejected and a stormy look darkened his face.

“Come on, don’t be a prude.”

Eleven gaped, and was ready to rip this douchebag a new one, but it turned out someone else wanted to do the honours.

“Back off, dude, she said she wasn’t interested.”

Trusty old Mike.

“Whatever,” the guy huffed, stalking off towards the bar.

“I thought people who went to art gallery events were supposed to be classy.” Eleven rolled her eyes, only mildly perturbed by the interruption.

“I’m most disappointed that men will only respect women after being told to by another man,” Max commented, shaking her head.

“Why did you say no? He was hot.”

Dustin coughed, wordlessly expressing the slight discomfort of most of the group due to Ivy’s comment. First off, it was maybe slightly insensitive to announce one’s attraction to someone else when one’s fiancee is in the room. Secondly, Eleven was a little appalled that Ivy didn’t seem to mind that the guy was clearly an asshole.

She held down her scoff and shrugged instead, surprisingly deciding to answer Ivy seriously.

“I just don’t date,” Eleven explained.

“Why not?” the blonde countered, her blue eyes bright with curiosity.

Everyone else visibly stilled, seemingly refusing to move a muscle as if it would give something away. Eleven looked over at Mike, who returned the look with a soft gaze, shrugging as if to confirm that it was Eleven's choice whether to fill his girlfriend in or not.

Eleven exhaled, and her fingers automatically fell to the blue elastic that was strapped to her wrist, fumbling with the material.

"That was my sister's dying wish," she said, slightly dramatically, then finished it off with a smile as if the whole thing was a joke.

Ivy glanced at Mike, for clarification maybe? But Mike's eyes were on Eleven, fond and thoughtful. The rest of the group seemed to have settled their gazes on their shoes, except for Dustin's plus one, who also seemed greatly intrigued by the turn in conversation.

"Actually?" the blonde asked, quirking an eyebrow as she tried to gage how serious Eleven was being.

"Yup," Eleven confirmed, sticking with the casual tone, then dropped her voice playfully. "And now you know my biggest secret."

Ivy was still eyeing Eleven warily, so she shot her a smile, a genuine one to let her know that no, this was not a joke but also it's not something she needed to feel uncomfortable about. Eleven was just like that; blunt and direct. She didn't waste time making others guess what she thought or felt. She figured that was easier for everyone involved.

Eleven saw Ivy's posture finally relax.

"Well, I'm sorry about your sister," Ivy said politely, offering a sympathetic grin.

"No worries. That was a long time ago," Eleven assured, brushing it off.

She looked again at Mike, whose focus remained trained on her, and he also supplied a sympathetic grin, but it was somehow more heartfelt and understanding than anything Eleven thought Ivy could ever possibly muster up. Maybe it was because they had grown so attuned to each other's facial expressions and body language over

time, but she and Mike were definitely capable of summing up a million words into a single look in each other's direction. It made her feel warm.

As the group awkwardly but surely changed the subject and carried on a conversation similar to the one prior to their interruption, Eleven felt the slightest presence. An energy, or a shadow or intangible force that brushed against her body, somehow soothing and alarming at the same time. It gave her a feeling, the smallest intuition, that maybe, just maybe, somewhere along the line, she had gotten something wrong.

Her hand fell back to the blue band that clung tightly to her forearm.

Notes for the Chapter:

im actually really proud of how i wrote the flashback for this chapter, but im not super in love with the present

hopefully it's not another three months before i update again, but idk if i can make any promises lolz

as always, leave a kudos if you liked it and let me know what you think <3

5. time and time again, i'm tired

Notes for the Chapter:

title is from 'LăViNDăR' by brother kamau

hello friends! sorry for the wait, yet again. i've started trying to take a little more time writing these chapters for both this story and my other one which is why my updates are lagging a bit.

i've noticed a lot of people are worried that mileven isn't endgame with this story and while i'd rather not confirm or deny that to keep up the suspense, let me just say that i think mike has a line in this chapter that gives you guys a bit of a hint about the direction this story is going.

thanks for reading!

five and a half years earlier

Her hand trembled as it reached into the small cabinet tucked above the refrigerator. Her vision was blurred and she wobbled on her feet, seeking balance as she read over the many labels on the bottles inside. She had already finished off what had remained in a 2-6 of cheap whiskey and her mouth felt dry, her throat yearning for the scalding burn of alcohol.

El settled on a half-full bottle of spiced rum with a picture of a pirate on its label and pulled it out. She placed it on the table, accidentally slamming it more hashly than intended, and pondered whether to bother with a glass or not.

That's when she heard the front door creak open, quiet footsteps padding into the entryway. Her heart seized as she wondered if her mother had returned. If she had regretted storming off, had realized that she was abandoning her daughter; her only daughter, now. Except, El rationalized, maybe she had only forgotten something, her mind still oblivious to the damage she was causing.

A few hours ago, her mother had managed to slip out the front door with suitcases weighing down her arms, her intent to sneak away in the night unnoticed was clear. El had only caught her by chance when she came down the staircase from her room, seeking a snack. They made brief eye contact, a still moment where a harrowing wave of realization washed over El, and then her mother looked away, closing the door behind her without a word of explanation. Almost immediately, out of anger or sadness or jealousy or a combination of all three, El had turned to the liquor cabinet for an escape.

The footsteps grew closer and El stood frozen with her hand still wrapped around the neck of the glass bottle, waiting for her mother to appear, for her mother to wrap her up in her arms and apologize, apologize, apologize, and promise to never run away like that again.

Instead, Mike emerged in the doorway of the kitchen and a bittersweet sensation of disappointment and relief rippled through El. His hair was a pile of curls but still a little damp as if he had just gotten out of the shower, and he was wearing grey sweatpants and a plain white tee as if he had just thrown whatever clothes he could find on his way out the door. His face was twisted with concern, eyes darting from El to the bottle of rum and back.

“What are you doing here?” she asked darkly, feeling the slur of her words as they escaped her mouth but ignoring it.

“Your dad called me and told me what happened,” Mike replied, stepping forward slightly and looking around the kitchen as if gaging the situation, then glanced back at El with grave eyes. “You didn’t think I would find out somehow?”

“I don’t care,” El insisted, forgetting about the glass dilemma and bringing the rim of the bottle to her lips and swallowing down the bitingly sugary rum. She wiped the remnants from her lips and turned so her back was facing her best friend. “I just want to be alone.”

“What, so that you can poison yourself?” Mike snapped, pulling on El’s shoulder so that she swiveled around and prying the bottle from her hands. “How much have you had to drink?”

“Not that much,” she lied, and Mike managed to pick up and follow her slight glance towards the empty whiskey bottle sitting on the counter.

“Why are you doing this?” he demanded, his jaw set in anger as he stared her down. “This isn’t going to fix anything, it’s just going to hurt you.”

“I guess I’m just following in my parents’ footsteps,” El cried, throwing her arms up in frustration and swaying slightly from the force of the movement. “I’m just gonna be a drunk like them, waste away my life and be alone forever.”

“Is that what Sarah would want?”

El felt sudden tears spring to her eyes. She thought she was done crying, had decided that she should have expected her mother to leave, that she shouldn’t be surprised and she didn’t have a reason to be upset. But Mike knew how to hit her where it hurt.

“Don’t fucking say that to me,” she mumbled, her words choppy and wet as she reached for the bottle he still held in his hands. “Give me that!”

“No, you’ve had enough,” Mike argued, keeping a tight grip.

They fought over it for a moment in tense silence, tugging it back and forth until finally it fell suddenly loose from Mike’s fingers. Surprised, El fell backwards and the bottle hit the edge of the table at just the right angle to make it explode into a dozen shards of glass, the pieces falling to the ground just as El did, almost in slow motion.

“Fuck,” Mike cursed, avoiding any obvious pieces of glass as he moved forward, kneeling down beside her.

“Mike,” El mumbled weakly, staring down at the palm of her right hand and watching as red hot blood blossomed out of a cut there. The fiery pain that erupted from the site was definitely sobering.

“It’s okay,” Mike soothed her calmly, taking the injured hand and examining it. “It’s not too deep. We just need to clean you up.”

He carefully helped her to her feet, instructing her where to step so as to avoid the sharp fragments of the bottle scattered across the kitchen floor. They moved swiftly to the bathroom so that the blood wouldn't hit the floor and stain it, and once inside Mike grabbed a cloth to press to the wound to stop the bleeding.

"Can we sit?" El asked softly, feeling only slightly faint.

Mike nodded and offered his arm for her to hold on to as he lowered her to the ground, her back pressed up against the bathtub. They waited a few minutes, El closing her eyes and fighting off sleep while Mike just gave her concerned glances and focused on keeping pressure on her hand until the bleeding stopped.

"Hey, listen," Mike said softly, finally removing the cloth and checking to see if there was any glass stuck in the cut. He watched her and waited until she opened her eyes, gazing gently back at him before he continued. "I'm sorry for bringing up Sarah. But you know she wouldn't want this for you."

"I don't care, I hate her," El replied, her words still slurred as her head spun somewhat. She avoided looking at her hand while Mike cleaned it, trying to avoid feeling any more sick.

"That's not true," Mike disagreed distractedly, carefully wiping away the crimson colour that stained her skin.

"Yes, it is," she insisted, feeling her throat tighten as another onslaught of tears approached. "If she hadn't died, if she hadn't left us, my parents wouldn't have gotten so screwed up."

"No," Mike responded firmly. He crawled over to the bathroom cabinets to retrieve some gauze and then returned to her side, beginning to wrap the fabric around her hand. "This has nothing to do with Sarah."

"It has everything to do with her. She was the glue that kept them together."

"Maybe temporarily." Mike shrugged. He finished bandaging her hand and finally looked up to make eye contact with El, lifting a

hand to smear away the small tears that had puddled on her cheeks. “I think that if a person is meant to be with someone, or if they’re not meant to be with the person they’re with, they all get there eventually.”

“What about people that aren’t meant to be with anyone?” El mumbled, a personal fear of hers that lurked quietly in the background of her thoughts came brutally to the forefront.

“Everyone’s meant to be with someone,” Mike asserted confidently. He moved to sit beside El, taking her good hand and entangling their fingers. “Even if it’s just as friends.”

“So you think we’re meant to be friends,” El concluded, smiling slightly as she enjoyed the sentiment of that revelation, shifting to rest her head on Mike’s shoulder. “Like, soulmates?”

“Yeah, sure,” Mike agreed, nodding easily. “All of us. Max, Dustin, Lucas, Will. We’re all meant to be together.”

“I like that,” El hummed sleepily as she snuggled closer to Mike’s side, a content grin on her face.

“Me too, El,” he replied softly, but she barely heard it, caught up in his warmth.

Even in the midst of her inebriation, she felt the familiar sensation of admiration that cascaded over her whenever she was in her best friend’s presence. A powerful feeling that erupted whenever Mike shared his wise words, his careful observations and interpretations of the commotion of life and all of its offerings. It constantly reminded El what a beautiful person Mike was and that he deserved the best that the world could possibly give.

But the feeling was often accompanied by an aftertaste of insecurity, like maybe she was incapable of giving him all of the love he deserved, like she wasn’t enough for him. And one day he would realize this and after that he wouldn’t be around to repair the damage El brought upon herself due to her worn and weary heart.

They didn’t speak of that night again, but in El’s memories, it seemed

to be the first time that El recognized that Mike seemed to be the dawn to her dusk.

present

“Have you ever written a sex scene?”

“Um, what?” Mike twisted around in his chair, the wheels on the bottom rolling with the force, to look at El. She was sprawled out on the couch, flipping through the pages of a random novel found on Mike’s massive bookshelf.

“You know, like Fifty Shades of Grey? Like ‘the spear of his manhood throbbed inside my aching vulva?’”

“What the fuck, El?”

She looked up from the writing before her and towards Mike, the challenging quirk of her brow accompanied by a playful twitch to her lips, remaining silent.

“No one ever uses the word ‘vulva’ in a sex scene.”

El laughed brightly at this, delighted by his response, and he watches with a satisfied smile.

“Have you, though?” she presses, her face glowing with entertainment and mischief.

“Maybe once or twice.” Mike shrugs, turning back around in his chair to face the computer on his desk again, his leg jiggling up and down incessantly. His fidgeting got worse when he was writing.

“Scandalous,” El remarked, whistling lowly. She pretended not to notice the tinge of a blush that creped up Mike’s neck.

It was a rainy day, and the downpour outside was soon approaching the likes of a storm. El had the day off work and decided to spend it at Mike’s home – Mike and Ivy’s home, the one they had moved into only a month or so ago. It was spacious with a couple more rooms than were unnecessary at the moment but sparked a suggestion of the possibility of little ones joining the family someday.

With the house had come an office space as well that El was certain Mike was ecstatic about. Instead of keeping his books in messy piles on the floor of his old, cramped apartment, he now had them stacked up in a beautiful, mahogany bookcase. Instead of doing his writing on his computer at his desk at the foot of his bed with very little space in between, he had enough room in the office to furnish it with a small couch and coffee table. The amount of time Mike spent in there even when he wasn't weaving up fantastical science fiction novels at his keyboard inferred that he had found a new happy place.

El tossed the book she had been holding aside and instead snatched up one of Mike's many journals, lazily left on the coffeetable, its pages wrinkled around the edges and its spine cracked with use.

El seemed to be the only person Mike truly trusted to read his work, or at least the makings of it since a couple of his shorter novels had somehow managed to be published and truly anyone could read the manifestations of his imagination. But since they were preteens, El was the only one that he showed his notes, his dribbles, his scribbled plots with holes that he needed her criticism and opinions to be able to fill.

She turned through the pages, fingers drifting over the writing there, Mike's thoughts materialized into ink. From what she gathered by reading bits and pieces as she flipped through, this journal seemed to centralize on one story alone. Usually, Mike had a dozen different ideas drifting through his head at any given time, and so his journals were scattered plotlines and character descriptions, lone lines of dialogue and out of context imageries. But this diary was different.

"That's pretty much the basis of the new story I'm working on," Mike spoke all of a sudden and El startled, having fallen into the rhythm of the raindrops pelting the windows and the blue fingerprint smudges along the sides of the pages before her.

"What?" She looked up and Mike had his back to her.

"That journal," he answered, still facing his computer, his voice only semi-serious. "It's a big one. This idea I have – I just have a good feeling about it. Could be a bestseller even, I think."

“Tell me about it,” El urged softly, still flicking mindlessly through the journal.

“It’s about this girl that has the ability to travel across dimensions, sometimes intentionally and sometimes accidentally. She starts to have trouble remembering which dimension is the true one – the one she came from, because some of them are nearly identical except for very small differences.”

“How Stephen King of you,” El commented, no heat behind her words.

“I’m taking that as a compliment,” Mike replied, and she could hear the grin in his voice. “Anyway, turns out there’s this guy that she notices is kind of a constant in every dimension. He never changes, he’s always there, and she starts to realize that he has an ability too; he can see through time and space.”

“Now it sounds like a Doctor Who episode,” El teased, smiling.

“No, he can’t *travel* through time and space, he can just see through it.”

El was about to reply when a small piece of paper fluttered out of the journal and into her lap, apparently tucked in there somewhere between the pages.

‘*The name of a number*,’ was written along the top as if it were a title. El paused, processing the words and couldn’t help but think of herself. Of how she had nicknamed herself ‘Eleven,’ of how she had the name of a number.

Instinctually, El glanced up to make sure Mike wasn’t looking, before proceeding to read the rest of the writing on the paper, her heart beating fast as she had a strong feeling that maybe this was something she wasn’t meant to see.

The name of a number

The count of a girl, the birthmarks, the smiles

The word of a whisper, the secrets, the lies

Her sweet delight is my deep anguish

In my pain, I find her presence

Always here, never alone

Haunted by the sum

El swallowed thickly, trying to make sense of the words and fearing that they bore a heavy meaning, that they had significance and she needed to pay attention to them, remember them. As if on cue, she heard the angry grumbling of thunder in the distance, beginning to descend upon them.

She heard the swivel of Mike's chair and quickly tucked the small paper into the pocket of her jeans, vowing to examine the words more later. El was sure Mike wouldn't miss the poem for a while, and she would probably return it later, but her mind bubbled with a hunch that it was a message, or a sign, and she needed to take it with her.

El looked up and Mike was looking at her expectantly.

"So, what do you think?" he asked, casually enough.

"What?" she breathed back at him. He couldn't have seen, right? He didn't know she found the poem, the mystery of prose that needed to be solved, did he?

"The book idea," Mike supplied, shrugging, an insecure look to his face like he was seeking just a touch of validation.

"Oh, yeah," El replied, trying to remember the conversation they had been having before and to conjure up a convincing smile. "It sounds great. A bestseller, for sure."

Mike eyed her warily, frowning.

"You okay?" he asked, looking truly concerned and prepared to provide whatever aid El required.

"Yes!" El assured him, a bit too eagerly, promptly standing up from

her seat on the couch. “Actually, I think I forgot something that I have to do for work before tomorrow.”

“Oh,” Mike mumbled, eyebrows falling together in disappointment.

“So, um,” El stuttered, reaching for her bag that was laid on the other side of the couch and swinging it over her shoulder. “I think I should go.”

She avoided his eyes, *‘haunted by the sum’* repeating itself over and over in her head, seeking purchase as if it was supposed to fit, supposed to make sense in the bumbling of her thoughts.

“Alright, well Ivy will be sad that she missed you,” Mike let her know, standing from his chair to bid her good bye. He looked disturbed by the turn of events, as if maybe he suspected that she had discovered something, stumbled upon a moment of truth.

“Tell her I’ll visit again soon,” El replied automatically, not truly concerned about Ivy’s displeasure as she made a beeline towards the door. “We’re supposed to go shopping or something like that soon, anyway.”

“Um, okay. Sounds good.” Mike nodded, a small confused tint to his face still, and he stepped forward as if to embrace El or kiss her or all of the above.

She dodged swiftly out of his potential grasp, landing herself firmly on the other side of the doorway. El offered a meek farewell, avoiding his gaze as she slipped out of the impressive house and into the rain.

The droplets landed heavy on her, seeping into her hair and dampening her clothes as she took a minute to collect herself. Her breaths came panicked and El felt that familiar worry that a piece of a puzzle had been misplaced, accidentally brushed under the couch or stowed in a drawer somewhere.

She wished Sarah were here, to tell her where she had gone so wrong to end up in this situation, to be depressed while Mike was getting married to, probably, the love of his life. Or her mother, despite not

having seen her in years, to offer advice from experience or just a shoulder to cry on.

In the blink of an eye, the sharp twist of a moment, El felt suddenly all alone in the world.

Notes for the Chapter:

i'm no poet, so i guess mike isn't much of one either
lol

lowkey, the sex scene stuff is kind of an insult directed at myself because i definitely need to improve on the quality of my smut writing. especially since the next chapter includes A LOT of it

also, don't know if you guys noticed but Eleven is just gonna go by El now, I just gotta go back and change that in the rest of the chapters

i wrote the last 500 words and edited this while half-drunk because thats how i do things, so sorry if there are any mistakes!

as always, leave a kudos if you liked it and let me know what you think!